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A Profile of Participation in Distance Education: 1999–2000

Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Reports

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

During the 1990s, distance education availability, course offerings, and enrollments increased rapidly. The percentage of 2- and 4-year degree-granting institutions offering distance education courses rose from 33 to 44 percent between 1995 and 1997, and the number of such courses nearly doubled. In 1997, one-fifth of the nation's 2- and 4-year degree-granting institutions also planned to start offering distance education courses in the next 3 years (Lewis et al. 1999). While previous reports have studied institutional (Lewis et al. 1999) and faculty (Bradburn 2002) participation in distance education, this report focuses on student participation. This report examines the participation of undergraduate and graduate students in distance education.

Students responding to the 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000) were asked, “During the 1999–2000 school year, did you take any courses for credit that were distance education courses? By distance education, I mean courses delivered off campus using live, interactive TV or audio; prerecorded TV or audio; CD-ROM; or a computer-based system such as the Internet, e-mail, or chat rooms.” Students who reported taking distance education courses were asked about their experiences with distance education.

This report uses data from NPSAS:2000 to address several research questions:

- Which students participated in distance education in 1999–2000? Were any student characteristics related to participation in distance education?

- Which types of technology did students use to take their distance education courses?
- How satisfied were students with their distance education courses?

Students' overall participation, as well as their participation by type of distance education technology, is examined in terms of numerous student characteristics, including demographics (such as gender, race/ethnicity, and age); indicators of socioeconomic status (such as parents' highest level of education and students' family income); family status (marital status and whether students had dependent children); institution and academic characteristics (such as institution type, and students' class level, degree program, and field of study); and employment characteristics. This report also includes a multivariate analysis that shows how various student characteristics were related to participation in distance education after controlling for the covariation of related variables.

Student Participation in Distance Education

The findings of this study suggest that even though distance education participation rates were relatively low in 1999–2000 (8 percent of undergraduates and 10 percent of graduate and first-professional students reported taking distance education courses), clear patterns of participation emerged for both undergraduates and graduate/first professional students. Students who reported participating tended to be those with family responsibilities and limited time. They

were more likely to be enrolled in school part time and to be working full time while enrolled.

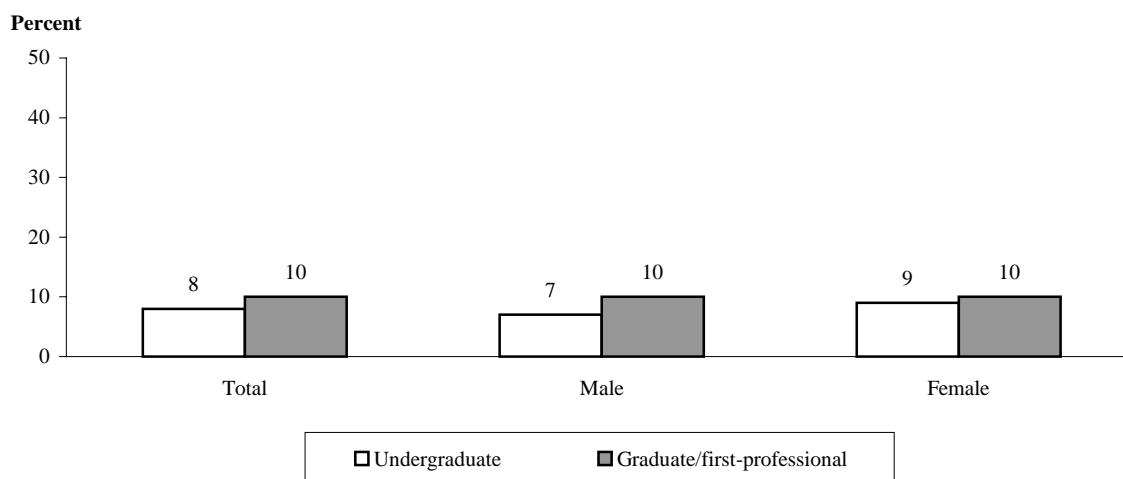
Participation of Undergraduates

Among undergraduates, characteristics associated with family and work responsibilities (such as being independent, older, married, or having dependents) were associated with higher rates of participation in distance education. Gender was related to participation as well: females were more likely than males to participate (figure A). The participation rates of undergraduates attending public 2-year institutions and those seeking associate's degrees also tended to be higher than those of their counterparts in other types of institutions and degree programs.

In addition, participation in distance education varied by undergraduate field of study. Undergraduates majoring in education participated in distance education at a higher rate than did those majoring in most other fields of study.

Students who reported participating in distance education were asked if their entire program was taught through distance education. Among undergraduates who participated in distance education, those who had characteristics associated with higher overall rates of participation were also generally more likely than those who lacked these characteristics to report that their entire program was taught through distance education.

Figure A.—Percentage of 1999–2000 undergraduate and graduate/first-professional students who participated in distance education, by gender



NOTE: Includes students who participated either only at the institution where they were primarily enrolled or both at the institution where they were primarily enrolled and somewhere else. Students who participated in distance education only at an institution other than the one where they were primarily enrolled were excluded.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Participation of Graduate and First-Professional Students

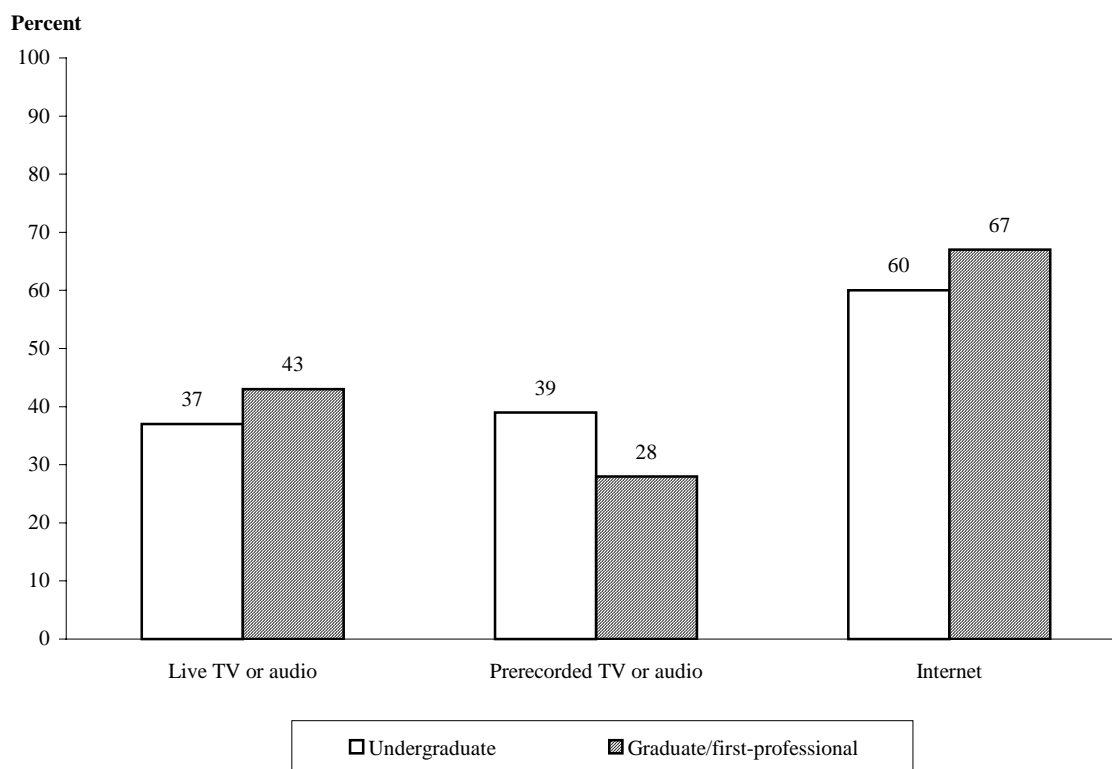
Similar patterns of participation emerged among graduate and first-professional students. While a gender difference was not detected, married students and those with dependent children were more likely than their counterparts to participate in distance education. Greater work intensity also appeared to contribute to higher participation. Due to low incidence and resulting small sample sizes, it was not possible to conduct subgroup comparisons of the availability of

graduate and first-professional students' entire programs via distance education.

Distance Education Delivery

Among those who took distance education courses, both graduate and undergraduate students were more likely to do so via the Internet than via either live or prerecorded TV or audio (figure B). Graduate and first-professional students were less likely than undergraduates to participate in distance education courses via prerecorded TV or audio but were more likely than undergraduates to participate via live TV or audio or via the Internet.

Figure B.—Among 1999–2000 undergraduate and graduate/first-professional students who participated in distance education, percentage who participated via live TV or audio, prerecorded TV or audio, or the Internet



NOTE: Includes students who participated either only at the institution where they were primarily enrolled or both at the institution where they were primarily enrolled and somewhere else. Students who participated in distance education only at an institution other than the one where they were primarily enrolled were excluded.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Satisfaction With Distance Education

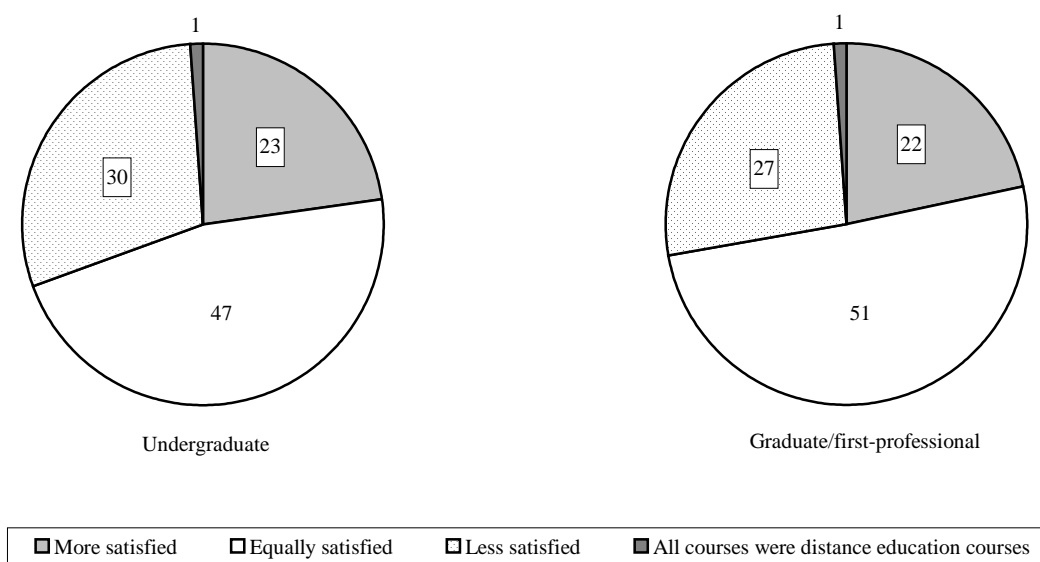
Undergraduate and graduate/first-professional students who participated in distance education were asked, “Compared to other courses you’ve taken, are you more satisfied, equally satisfied, or less satisfied with the quality of instruction you’ve received in your distance education courses?”

About one-half of both undergraduates (47 percent) and graduates (51 percent) reported being

equally satisfied with their distance education courses and their regular classroom courses (figure C). However, a higher proportion of undergraduates reported being less satisfied with distance education courses (30 percent) than reported being more satisfied (23 percent).

Among graduate and first professional students, 27 percent reported being less satisfied and 22 percent reported being more satisfied.

Figure C.—Among 1999–2000 undergraduate and graduate/first-professional students who participated in distance education, percentage distribution according to satisfaction with quality of instruction in distance education relative to classroom-based courses



NOTE: Includes students who participated either only at the institution where they were primarily enrolled or both at the institution where they were primarily enrolled and somewhere else. Students who participated in distance education only at an institution other than the one where they were primarily enrolled were excluded. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).